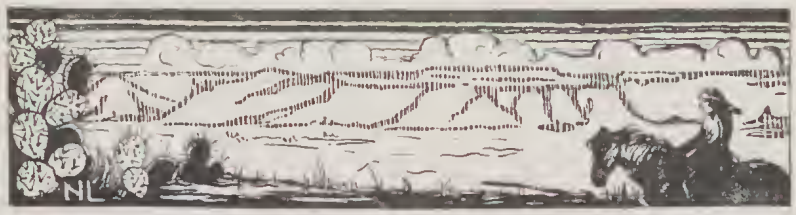
WHO ARE THE NAVAHOS?

by

ROBERTA CALDWELL
Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, Number 149

October 4, 1947



Who Are the Navahos?

The Navaho Indians live in the southwestern part of our country but this is not their original home. It is still doubtful when, how, and from what place the Navahos came to their present homeland. However, from documents of Navaho legends certain bits of information can be worked together to tell a part of the story.

An unknown number of years ago, possibly several thousand, the ancestors of the Navahos lived somewhere in northern Asia. Perhaps it was the search for better hunting grounds that led them across Bering Strait and into the New World. For many hundreds of years they lived as wandering hunters in northwestern Canada. Finally, a thousand or more years ago, they migrated southward and came to Arizona and New Mexico where the Pueblo Indians were living.

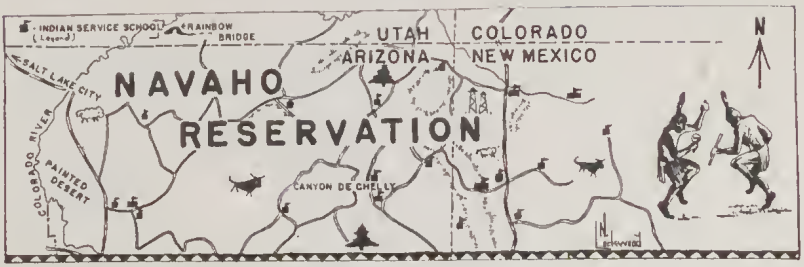
Until they reached the Southwest, the Navahos lived by hunting game and gathering wild seeds and fruits. They knew nothing of farming or the weaving of blankets. Gradually they learned from their Pueblo neighbors how to grow corn, beans, and squashes, and their life became more settled. Later, after the coming of the Spaniards, the Navahos began to herd sheep and to weave woolen blankets. Evidently the Pueblo Indians taught them many things, for Navaho legends are full of references to their powerful Pueblo neighbors.

The Navahos do not refer to themselves by the name "Navaho" but call themselves "Dineh, the People" or simply "The People." The origin of the name Navaho

is uncertain. It is likely that the name is derived from the Tewa (Pueblo) word "Navahu," which means "large tracts of cultivated lands." The Navahos and their neighbors, the Apaches, belong to the family of tribes that speak the Dineh or Athabascan language and their nearest relatives today outside of the Southwest are the Indians of northwestern Canada.

The present home of the Navahos is on a reservation area of about sixteen million acres in northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southern Utah. Several million acres near the Reservation also are used by the Navahos, who lease the land or own allotments. This Navaho land is mainly a high plateau region that has an elevation of from five thousand to eight thousand feet. It is a sandy, arid country covered with sage brush, small groups of juniper trees, and pinyon, with fir trees replacing the sage in the higher elevations.

It is a country of great variety and beauty. There are brightly colored mesas and deep canyons. There are deserts that are either brilliant with wild flowers or gray and bleak, according to the season. But it is a country where a living is hard to make. Farming is difficult where water is scarce and unpredictable, where soil is thin or worn out, and where fields are cut by canyons and unexpected torrents of rain water. In spite of all this, the Navahos have thrived and their numbers have tripled since the earliest days. The Navahos earn their living by farming, herding sheep, weaving blankets and rugs, and making silver jewelry.



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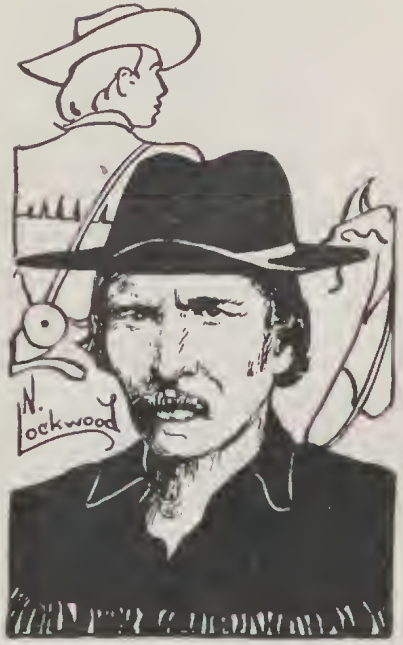
THE NAVAHOS SINCE THE COMING OF THE SPANIARDS

by

ROBERTA CALDWELL
Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, Number 150

October 11, 1947



The Navahos Since the Coming of the Spaniards

Colonel Kit Carson was sent by the Government to subdue the Navahos.

The Navahos once had been a powerful people. Then the Spaniards came to the Navaho country and their coming marked the beginning of a period of trouble for the Indians. The Navahos, their numbers reduced by warfare with the Spaniards, retreated westward to Canyon de Chelly (pronounced "canyon de shay") in Arizona, which was so hard to reach that the Indians felt safe there. When the tribe, protected by the canyon from enemies, had become larger and stronger, the Navahos returned to their former lands. In the course of time they grew to be a powerful people once more.

But the Navahos again were threatened with destruction when they came into contact with the advance of the westward-moving pioneer settlers. For several years the Indians fought bitterly against the pioneers and against the United States Government. Colonel Kit Carson, the greatest Indian fighter in the West, was sent by the Government to subdue the Navahos. War and disease took many lives and at last the tribe accepted a treaty.

Under the terms of the treaty, most of the Navahos were removed to eastern New Mexico, where they were held in captivity for four years. They were fed by the Government, but they did not know how to use the strange foods. Some of the food made them sick because they prepared it in the wrong way or because it had spoiled. Then to make things worse, the corn crop failed for several seasons. The Indians, weakened by not having enough food to eat, fell easy prey to disease and many of them died.

Finally a new treaty was drawn up. The Navahos were sent back to their own part of the country, where rations, blankets, a yoke of oxen, and a plow were given to each family and, in addition, two sheep to each adult and each child. After the Navahos returned to their home, they became healthy again. The tribe increased in numbers until by 1942 there were about fifty thousand Navahos living in the Southwest.

The Navahos took good care of the sheep that the Government had given them and built up large flocks until sheep raising came to be one of their main occupations. But after years of continued use, the land began to show the effects of overgrazing. Agents of the United States Government knew that this overgrazing eventually would wear out the land so that enough sheep could not be raised to support the constantly growing Navaho population. For this reason they urged the Navahos to reduce the size of their flocks.

To make up for the decreased number of sheep on the range, the Government has tried to help the Navahos to raise an improved type of sheep that would give the Navahos a greater annual income from the sale of mutton and wool than they had received from their former huge flocks of native sheep. About one-fourth of the total annual production of wool on the Reservation is woven by the Navahos into blankets and rugs.

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NAVAHO WEAVING

by

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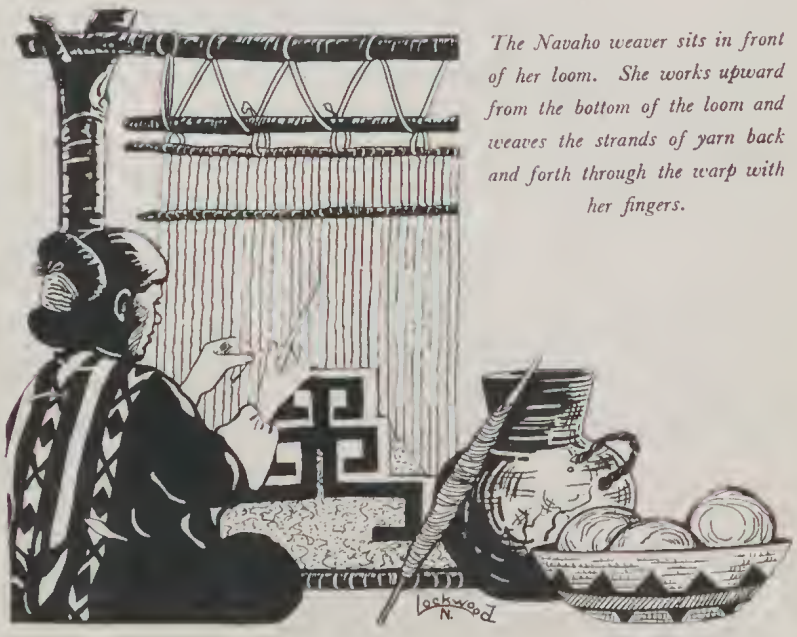
Navaho Weaving

Most of the Navaho women and some of the men have a knowledge of weaving. Weaving is more than a source of income for the Navahos. It is a tribal art that has been a strong influence in Navaho life for at least a century and a half.

When explorers from the eastern part of the United States began to enter the Southwest in the first years of the nineteenth century, the Navahos were making woolen blankets of fine quality. But when the Navahos started to weave blankets for sale, they began to be careless in their work. And when in later years the Indian weavers tried to turn out hand-woven articles in great quantities for the commercial market, the traditional high quality of their work was almost lost.

Government officials, Indian traders, and other people who are interested in Indian welfare have encouraged the Navahos to practice better workmanship. Also,



The Navaho weaver sits in front of her loom. She works upward from the bottom of the loom and weaves the strands of yarn back and forth through the warp with her fingers.

at the Indian schools, instruction is being given now to Navaho girls in the old-time Navaho methods of weaving. The girls are taught how to prepare the wool, how to dye it, and how to weave it into articles of high quality and traditional design.

Navaho methods of preparing wool for spinning and weaving are simple but they take time and are tedious work. First the wool is sorted. Then it is spread out on a sloping stone and cleaned by pouring over it hot water containing an extract of yucca root. When the wool is dry, it is combed (carded) with a pair of ordinary hand cards. The weaver holds one of the cards in each hand and combs out a small bunch of wool until the fibers are loose and fluffy. The wool is then ready to be spun. Spinning twists the wool until it becomes a firm yarn. To make the yarn more compact it may be respun once or even twice. The spindle is held in the hand. It consists of a small stick with a wooden disk at the base to give momentum and to make the spinning process easier.

Rigging the loom is the next step. The loom is a simple upright frame made of poles. To the top pole is attached the yarn beam from which the lengthwise threads (warp) are stretched to the bottom pole. The weaver sits in front of the loom. She works upward from the bottom of the loom and weaves strands of yarn back and forth through the warp. She inserts the crosswise strands (weft) with her fingers or with the aid of a twig and then forces them down into place by the blow of a batten stick. As she progresses with her weaving she lowers the yarn beam now and then so that the finished work can be rolled on the bottom pole, out of her way.

The question is sometimes asked why the Navahos never have adopted either a spinning wheel or a more complex type of loom. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the Navahos are a wandering people and their own kind of spindle and loom is easy to carry with them.

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THE COLORS IN NAVAHO WEAVING

by

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Raymond Foundation

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October 25, 1947

Herding sheep is often the work of Navaho children.

The Colors in Navaho Weaving

The colors of natural wool are white, brown, and black and a gray that is a combination of white wool and black wool. The colors of native dyes include black, blue, and green and several shades of yellow and red. Native dyes were made by early Navaho weavers in many different ways.

Black dye was made from the twigs and leaves of aromatic sumac mixed with the gum of pinyon and a native yellow ocher ground to a powder and roasted. It was used for darkening black wool, which in its natural state is not a true black. In the early days a blue was made from a native blue clay, but this blue was displaced later by indigo blue brought from Mexico. Green dye was a mixture of blue and yellow dyes.

Yellow dyes, in shades from greenish yellow through lemon to orange, were made from the yellow flowers of the rabbit weed. An orange-red, sometimes called old gold, came from crushed sorrel roots to which alum may have been added. The recipe for making red dye is not always the same, but the roots or bark of the mountain mahogany seem to have been in common use. The native reds were not true reds. They were pale, dull shades that were brownish or orange in hue.

It was not until the Indians devised a new kind of yarn that they could have a clear, brilliant red in their blankets. To make the new yarn, they unraveled bright-colored woolen cloth of Spanish and English origin and retwisted the ravelings for handweaving. This yarn was called bayeta yarn and the blankets made from it were called bayeta blankets. "Bayeta" is the Spanish word for the English "baize."

Red was the predominating color of blankets made of bayeta yarn. The color varied from scarlet to a reddish brown that when mellowed by time often became a strong rose. Navaho weavers of bayeta blankets used other colors of bayeta yarn, too—vivid greens and yellows and blues, but many people speak of the brilliant red as the "bayeta color."

It is said that one of the favorite materials as a source of bayeta yarn was the heavy woolen cloth of the Spanish army uniforms. It is also said that the Indians stole the uniforms from the bodies of dead soldiers. This story is told by Indian traders and blanket dealers. No doubt some cloth was obtained in this way but not enough to account for the great number of articles woven out of bayeta yarn. Some of the cloth may have been taken in raids on the Spanish settlers, but the Indians probably got most of it through barter.

A great change in the colors used in Navaho weaving came when aniline dyes began to make their appearance. In comparison with native colors, the colors produced by aniline dyes seem harsh and lifeless. But the Navahos regarded the new dyes with delight and used them with more enthusiasm than judgment. This is the reason that strange effects and hideous color combinations were produced in some of the weaving of that time. In recent years, however, Navaho weavers have given up their use of certain gaudy commercial dyes and yarns and are commencing to use more of their own pleasing colors again.

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NAVAHO BLANKETS AND RUGS

by

ROBERTA CALDWELL
Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, Number 153

November 1, 1947

Navaho Blankets and Rugs

Navaho blankets were woven for use as wearing apparel until about 1880. They are known as "shoulder blankets" because they were worn about the shoulders. The old shoulder blankets were woven so tightly that they were almost waterproof. Navaho rugs are of later origin. They were not woven before 1880.

Historic blankets and rugs can be grouped into four periods. The first period dates from the early part of the nineteenth century. Most of the few blankets remaining from this period are preserved in museums and private collections. They are woven in broad, horizontal stripes of natural-colored wool or native-dyed yarn on a white background.

The second period is from 1850 to about 1870. Many blankets of this period were obtained by army officers, private collectors, and Navaho traders. Later they gave, sold, or loaned the blankets to museums. Blankets of the second period are of outstanding texture. They fall into two distinct types—the "Classic" blanket and the "Chief" blanket.

The design of the Classic blanket consists of simple stripes and stepped zigzags or terraces. The Chief blanket bears a design of alternating broad bands of brown or black and white. Sometimes there is a stripe of indigo blue. Rows of rectangular figures often are incorporated into the pattern. Another characteristic of the blankets of this period is the use of bayeta yarn.

The third period, from about 1870 to 1890, saw the transformation of the blanket into a rug for commercial use. Diamond patterns in a great variety of sizes and combinations are characteristic of the third period. After 1890, very few blankets were woven.

The fourth period covers about twenty-five or thirty years, from 1890 to 1915 or 1920. One of the distinguishing features of rugs of this period is the use of a central design with a border around it.

So we see that within the space of about a century there have been four distinct styles in Navaho weaving. These styles reflect the changes in culture that took place in Navaho life. Perhaps the most important change in Navaho life and in Navaho weaving commenced in 1880, when the Navahos were able to buy from the early settlers manufactured blankets for their own use and at the same time find a market for their hand-woven articles among the settlers.

The change from weaving for tribal use to the production of woven articles for sale resulted in a rapid growth of the craft. It was about this time that the Navahos first obtained the bright-colored Saxony and Germantown yarns and aniline dyes. The novelty of ready-dyed yarns and easy-to-use aniline dyes captivated the Indians and for sevcral years they stopped using native colors almost entirely. The new materials speeded up the work so that the weavers could turn out great numbers of hand-woven articles for the fast-growing trade with the outside world. But careless workmanship often was the result. And, also, the products were characterized by gaudy colors in unpleasing combinations because the weavers used the new dyes and yarns with thoughtless enthusiasm, regardless of the effect.

But the Navahos have improved the quality of their work. People who are interested in Navaho welfare have urged the Navaho weavers to keep their products salable by not sacrificing the good color, pleasing design, and careful workmanship of old-time Navaho weaving.

N. Lockwood

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NAVAHO DESIGNS

by

ROBERTA CALDWELL
Raymond Foundation

CHICAGO
NATURAL HISTORY
MUSEUM
RESEARCH EDUCATION
FOUNDED
1893
BY MARSHALL FIELD

Museum Stories, Number 154

November 8, 1947

Navaho Designs

The Navahos say that they learned the art of blanket-making from the Spider Woman but that she had learned it from the Spider who was a fine spinner. In gratitude to the Spider, Navaho weavers used to leave a tiny hole somewhere in each blanket, perhaps in the center or in some part of the design or along the edge, to symbolize the hole in the center of a spider's web. But the Indian

traders tried to discourage the practice because people did not like to buy blankets with a hole in them. So the weavers learned to conceal the hole very carefully.

The origin of the designs used by Navaho weavers is not certainly known. Navaho designs may represent ideas borrowed from the Pueblos, from the Spaniards, and from other sources. The earliest Navaho blankets have broad, horizontal stripes. Later many geometric figures, either alone or in combination with horizontal or vertical stripes, came to be used. The more common designs are triangles, squares, parallelograms, and diamonds. Often the outlines of the figures are broken in a stepped or terraced effect.

The ordinary diamond pattern is sometimes called "Large Star," after the morning star. Massed triangles may represent clouds and a zigzag line suggests lightning. The swastika, the oldest symbolic Navaho design, also is used. Many people attribute symbolic meanings to all

designs used in Navaho weaving but, unless they also occur in Navaho ceremonial sandpaintings, Navaho rug designs probably have no special tribal significance.

In the Navaho Rain Chant, a legend is told that mentions the origin of a traditional blanket pattern known as "Beautiful Design." According to the story, the Rain God who lived at Rainbow Bridge on Navaho Mountain was displeased with his wives and imprisoned them. During their imprisonment, they entertained themselves by devising Beautiful Design, a pattern of butterfly wings. The pattern was suggested to their minds when The Great Gambler, who was considered in Navaho religion to be an evil force, appeared before them in the form of a beautiful butterfly.

The Indians have a belief that a blanket design, because it takes form in the weaver's mind, has the thoughts of the weaver woven into it. They say that if many blankets are made, the weaver will lose her mind. They call this "blanket sickness."

Sometimes a weaver uses a lightning pattern for many blankets. The Navahos say that later she may develop sharp, lightning-like pains in her body because she has woven too many blankets of this design. When this happens, the only cure, they say, is to call upon a medicine man. He prays over the weaver and massages her. Then he "winds" the pain into a string to "draw it out of the body"—that is the way the Indians describe the gestures of the medicine man. But the most important part of the treatment is to make a lightning sandpainting for the weaver. A sandpainting is a ceremonial picture made with sands of different colors. The patient will get well if the gods are pleased with the sandpainting.

The designs in the margin of this story are associated with Navaho religion. The design in the lower margin is one of the variations of a traditional design often used by Navaho weavers in a border pattern.

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SANDPAINTING BLANKETS

by

ROBERTA CALDWELL
Raymond Foundation

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November 15, 1947

Sandpainting Blankets

The first sandpainting blanket is said to have been made in 1910 by a Navaho medicine man. Sandpainting blankets are scarce and the demand for them is great. One thousand dollars is an average price for a genuine sandpainting blanket, and several times that amount might be paid for a very fine one.

The supply of sandpainting blankets is limited because weaving a blanket of this type conflicts with traditional Navaho religious teachings. Sandpainting is not an art but a religious rite. When a sandpainting is copied by a weaver, that person is thought to incur the wrath of the gods. Some Indians believe that to copy a sandpainting in exact detail will protect the weaver. Others believe that by changing the design slightly the copier will be safe, for unless the sacred pictures are accurate they are not true sandpaintings.

The Navahos worship a great number of gods and goddesses, who are said to be stern, jealous, and easily angered. They often come down from the sky at night to see which Indians are making sacrifices and which Indians are not. To appease the gods and goddesses, the Indians sing chants, offer prayers and sacrifices, and make sandpaintings.

Sandpainting was taught to the Navaho prophet, Pretends-to-See-People, by the Yei, as the great group of Navaho deities is called. The Yei often have been compared to the gods of the ancient Greeks and, like them, are thought of as having human characteristics.

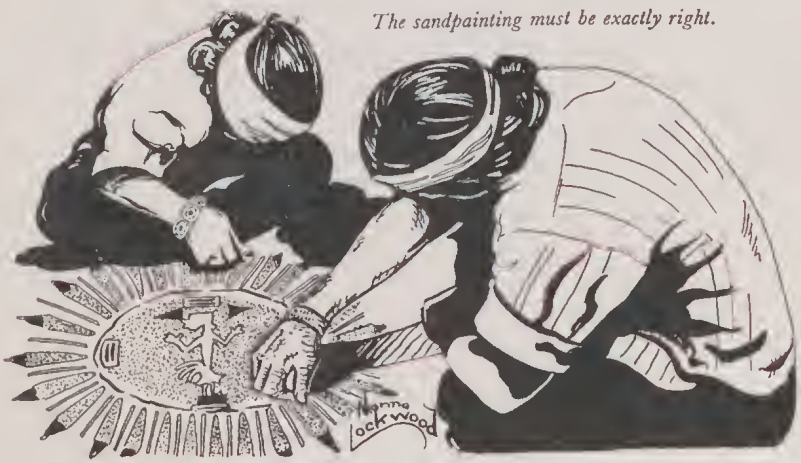
When the gods taught Pretends-to-See-People how to make sandpaintings, they showed him pictures painted on the clouds because the gods could not trust earthly people with more permanent forms. To reproduce these sacred pictures for the sight of mortals, only sand could be used and even that had to be wiped out at the end of each day. Because of the sacred nature of sandpaintings

it is said that misfortune, illness, or death will befall anyone who tries to copy the pictures in a permanent form of any kind.

The main purpose of a sandpainting seems to be to summon the gods, who come down from the sky to look at the finished work. The pictures, which must be made exactly right or the gods will be displeased, are always done under the supervision of the medicine man, but he or anyone else may do the actual work. Sandpaintings vary greatly in width—from about two inches for the sun picture of the Female Shooting Arrow Chant to as much as twelve feet for group pictures of the Night Chant and Mountain Chant.

The pattern of most of the sandpaintings consists of four or eight figures arranged around a central design. Three sides are enclosed by a rainbow. The fourth side always serves as an opening to the east. Two snakes or insects or other nature deities guard this gateway. Four plants usually grow out from the center of the pattern to touch the four corners. Natural yellow sand is used for the foundation and the designs are "painted" on by sprinkling colored sands over it. The colors used in a sandpainting and a sandpainting blanket are the five ceremonial colors: blue, white, yellow, black, and red.

The sandpainting must be exactly right.



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CEREMONIAL COLORS OF THE NAVAHOS

by

ROBERTA CALDWELL
Raymond Foundation

Museum Stories, Number 156

November 22, 1947

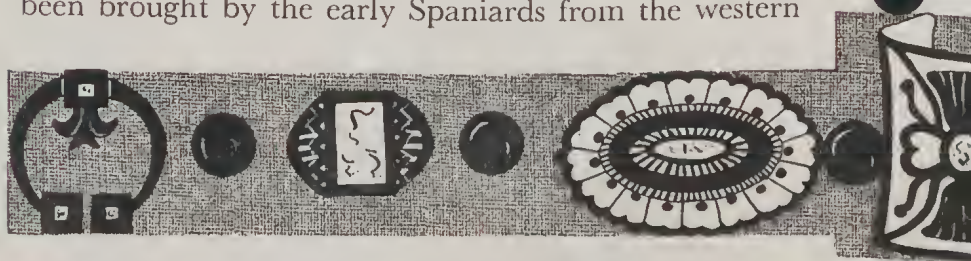
Ceremonial Colors of the Navahos

The five ceremonial colors of the Navahos are blue, white, yellow, black, and red. They are found in nearly all sandpaintings and sandpainting blankets. Red, which is used less often than the other colors, represents rainbows and sun rays. White symbolizes Early Dawn, yellow the Yellow Twilight, blue the Blue Twilight, and black the Darkness of the North. These colors are also associated with certain sacred things: red for the sun, white for white shell, yellow for abalone shell, black for cannel coal, and blue for turquoise.

The turquoise is especially sacred to the Navahos because it is associated with the story of their origin. The Navahos say that their clans were created by Turquoise Woman after she became the bride of the Sun and went to live with him in the Western Ocean. He laid a rainbow across a sunbeam and took her through the sky to her new home. Turquoise Woman was lonesome there and so she created people, who became the founders of the various Navaho clans.

There never was a time that the Navahos did not have white shells (elam shells), abalone shells, turquoise beads, and cannel coal, they say. These objects are used in all tribal ceremonies and are offered to the gods as sacrifices. They were brought up from the Underworld at the time of creation, Navaho myths tell us.

The Navahos say that after their people came to this world they found turquoise and coal in the ground. They say, too, that a long time ago when they lived near the Big Waters of the West, they had white shells and yellow abalone shells. After they moved to the desert country they got the shells from Jemez, where they had been brought by the early Spaniards from the western



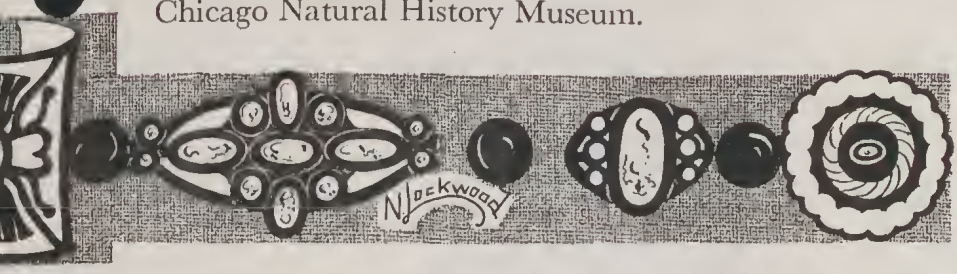
coast of Mexico. Today the Navahos obtain the shells by trade. They find the cannel coal on La Plata Mountain and elsewhere in their land.

The Navahos get their turquoise in many ways. A mine at Los Cerillos, near Santa Fe, is one of the sources. Formerly the mine was worked by the Pueblos, who sold the turquoise to the Navahos. The mine was taken away from the Pueblos by the Spaniards long ago, but even today the Pueblos still are able to obtain turquoise there in some way and they still find a ready market for it among the Navahos. Most Navahos would give almost anything to own the sacred turquoise because it is supposed to bring good luck.

Near the Los Cerillos mine there is a hot-spring geyser, called by the Navahos "Bead Spring." When the Navahos visit Bead Spring, they drop small chips of turquoise into it and then pray to their gods. The Navahos say that this will bring good luck in their trading.

The making of silver and turquoise jewelry provides the Navahos with a good income. Formerly the stones were used unmounted for religious purposes. The silversmith's art had its beginnings around the middle of the nineteenth century when the Indians began to learn how to work metal from the Mexican silversmiths who lived along the upper Rio Grande valley. Their first sources of silver probably were Mexican pesos and United States silver coins but they now use bar silver. Many of the young Navaho men today work in silver and make many beautiful pieces of jewelry in which they often set turquoise stones.

The panel at the bottom of this story shows different types of Navaho jewelry, sketched from the collection in Chicago Natural History Museum.



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SHEPHERDS IN THE DESERT COUNTRY

by

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Raymond Foundation

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Shepherds in the Desert Country

Among the Navahos, the clan is extremely important. Children belong to the mother and are said to be members of her clan. A man's clan is his mother's and one of the strictest social rules is that a man must never marry into his mother's clan, lest he become insane. When a man marries, he goes to live with his wife's family, who thank his parents for giving him to them. Even the younger Navahos who have been away to school and have grown away from some of the old teachings still follow the tribal custom of never marrying into the mother's clan.

The house in which a Navaho family lives is called a "hogan." It is located on a part of the range where the wife's clan lives. The Navahos have several kinds of houses besides their summer shelter of boughs. But they have no real villages—never more than three or four hogans are clustered together. In this respect, the Navahos are quite different from most of the other Indians of North America. There can be no Navaho villages because most of the Navahos are shepherds and, in the desert region where feed is always scarce, they must move their sheep frequently to new pastures.

The Navaho summer home is moved often from one grazing site to another but the winter home may be used for several years. However, should a death occur in a Navaho hogan, the Indians will not live there and they either abandon the hogan or burn it. The new home will be located somewhere near the old one.

Navaho families usually have more than one building on their homesites. There is often an extra house for storage purposes. Sometimes there is a house where the women can weave or sew. A short distance from the main dwelling there may be one or two small houses in which the Indians can take sweat baths. There are also storage dugouts and a corral for the animals.

Most of the Navaho dwellings have a smoke hole in the roof and a blanket-covered doorway facing east. A Navaho house is usually made of pinyon logs, boughs, and cedar bark. After the logs have been laid, the cracks are chinked with mud. The floor is dirt. The house is a crude affair and can be built in a day. It is said to be comfortable—warm in winter and cool in summer. Usually the neighbors help to build the house and so the cost of the new home is only the expense of feeding the helpers. But to find enough wood in the desert country to build the house takes considerable time and work.

Since most of the family life of the Navahos centers around the hogan, it is not surprising that the Indians sometimes think of their world as an enlarged house. In the old days one of the important features of their world was their religion. Although the Navahos never have built real temples, they have a certain type of house used only for ceremonial purposes. These are called Holy Houses and the Indians say that the earliest ones were built of turquoise, white shell, jet, or abalone shell. The first Holy Hogan is said to have been built for a god and goddess, "Everlasting" and "Peaceful," whose names are spoken at the end of every Song of Blessing.

A blanket-covered doorway faces east.

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